

CHAPTER

2

I was sitting on the low wall by the kitchen garden while Old Thomas cleaned up the cut on my head with some chaney-root water. He was singing while he cleaned, a sad song.

“Long time, I no see Li-za,” he sang. I wished he would stop as it was making me sad too, thinking about Mamma.

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“Why is it we are the slaves and they are our masters?” I asked. “Are they different from us? Underneath?”

Thomas laughed. “They the same. But they tell us – and themselves – a load of stories that we deserve nothing else. But really it’s jus’ because they hold the ships and the whips and the guns.”

“So if we held them they’d be our slaves?”

Thomas frowned. “Ain’t no merit in making any man a slave of another. You jus’ setting up a load of trouble.” He looked at my cut. “That’s better, now.”

I stood up. “So why do they do it?”

Thomas finished putting the tools away. “Money,” he said. “Always money. You go to town, you see. A free man gets paid for his labour. A slave? They get us to work with chains and whips and barely enough food, then they pile up the money in those big white plantation houses. They don’t have to pay us

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none so they buy themselves horses and carriages and fine, fine clothes. And if we die or starve it ain't no matter to them. They just go to Africa and steal some more of us."

"They don't think we are human?"

Old Thomas laughed. "You ain't learned that much yet?"

We finished clearing up. The sun was setting and the night birds were starting up calling. We set off for our huts on the far side of the hill, out of sight of the big house. Beyond the plantation the hills rose up to the south, and somewhere beyond them Mamma and Martha might be arriving at Mount Vernon, wherever that was.

Our huts, and there were more than I could number on my feet and hands together, stretched out towards the north. Enough for the women and men who worked the sugar cane, the children who worked alongside them in the weeding gangs soon as they could walk, and all the folk who worked in the big house

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cleaning and washing so the old mistress and young master never had to lift one little finger. There was a whole town's worth of us. All toiling and sweating for those two white folk.

"Why don't we just all wake up, Mr Thomas, in the middle of the night and chase those Barratts off? Move into the big house, live free like the Maroons?"

Old Thomas raised his eyebrows. "You never hear of slave rebellions? Every so often a bunch of us rise up, then they cut us down twice as hard. We kill, or even hurt one white man, they kill twenty of us in return." He let out a long sigh. "Children, women – it ain't nothing to them..."

I kicked a stone off the path. I felt the anger bubbling up inside. "I won't stay here any more, Mr Thomas!"

The old man moved surprisingly fast. He gripped my arm and pulled me around.

"I won't hear no more talk like that! Those woods full of man

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traps, take your whole leg off. And if you walk along the road, they see your mark, they bring you right back.”

I pulled away. I knew he was right, but I kept quiet until we reached the compound where our one-room, mud-built huts were set out around the open-air cookhouse. From the smell of it I reckoned it was roast breadfruit tonight, but I wasn't sure I was hungry. I looked at Mr Thomas.

“You were free once,” I said. “What was it like?”

He leant on his stick. “Coromantee, the west coast of Africa.” He smiled a little. “Nicest farm you ever did see, best cattle for miles.” His smile faded. “I went out to run an errand for my mother. Last time I saw her I was younger than you are now. I was snatched and sold and chained up in one of their stinking boats.” He shook his head. “Sometimes I think we only born to suffer.”

I said nothing.

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“You thinking about her, son?” Mr Thomas asked.

I was. But I was also thinking about how much I hated everything in the whole world. Then I saw Bets, the maid from the big house, come out of our hut, shaking a mat Mamma had made out of rushes and tossing it aside like it was a piece of dirt. I wanted to run over and snatch it up, but Thomas put a hand on my shoulder.

“Time will pass, Nat. Your heart will ease soon enough.”

I didn't want my heart to ease. I wanted to scream and shout and fetch Mamma back.

“We slaves, we live, we die.” Thomas shrugged. “Maybe when we dead in heaven we get the chance to be free...”

I rubbed at my eyes. They prickled and stung.

I went to line up for supper with the others, but I could barely eat a mouthful.

So I gave my food to Thomas. Now that the women had

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claimed back Mamma's hut, he'd found me space in the hut he shared with the grooms who looked after the horses. Some of the boys from the weeding gangs were catching peenie wallies – fireflies – and maybe last week I'd have gone with them, caught some of my own to put in a bottle, but tonight I couldn't settle to anything.